

Building the World We Dream About

October 11, 2009
Rev. Martha Niebanck
First Parish in Brookline

Reading: from *The Velveteen Rabbit*

Margery Williams

“What is real?” asked the Rabbit of the Skin Horse one day.
“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”
“Does it hurt,” asked the Rabbit?
“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse (for he was always truthful.) Becoming Real doesn’t happen all at once. You **become**. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real, you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”

Reading: from “*Building the World We Dream About*”

Dr. Mark Hicks

About two years ago, I was invited to speak at a conference where our sisters and brothers were grappling with practices that are often seen and experienced in a multicultural congregation. I had created an experience I call a “theater of voices” wherein participants hear a wide range of first-person stories and perspectives. At the closing, I wanted participants to get in touch with a feeling of yearning and connection, so I chose the song, “Somewhere” from the Broadway musical “West Side Story.” For me, what was most important was that people could think about, “Where IS this place for us, where we can live out our dream as Unitarian Universalists?”

In retrospect, what I found to be interesting is that *I* wanted to use a version of “Somewhere” that represented *my* particular generational take on the song, so I chose this remake of “Somewhere” that was done by modern artists in 2002. So, in *my* world, “yearning for a new way to see the world” was best exhibited by the voice of Aretha Franklin, not Natalie Wood.

At the close of the session, we began to process the experience, and a music director came to the microphone (and said): 1) “West Side Story” was one of her favorite musicals of all time. 2) She was feeling very bereft by the “cultural wars” often associated with choices of music. 3) Listening to the wide array of experiences, she felt very alone, and distanced from the realities of other people. Their experience was simply not her experience. 4) Finally, with her voice choking back tears, she offered that she realized that “West Side Story” no longer belonged to her -- that part of the work of building a multicultural, multiracial spiritual community is coming to realize that we must be open to being nurtured in different ways.

Wow. That's a powerful story that suggests the deep and hard (intentional effort) that's associated with ... building the capacity for being a welcoming place. The work requires that (we) ... dare to be real. (We need to recognize) that in order to become a new self, (each of us) must carve out emotional space in the heart to encounter a new self. A self—like the Velveteen rabbit—that might not look pretty, and has worn edges. But, ah—that self is real, and honest, and true.

Sermon

As a child, I had never seen a person of color until my family stopped for lunch at the Howard Johnson's on the Garden State Parkway on the way to the shore. As my parents ate their ritual clam chowder, a man and a woman with very dark skin sat at the both behind us. I remember being fascinated by the way a colorful scarf tied in a knot in front covered the woman's head. She looked away from my curious eyes.

A typical five-year-old, I was not yet capable of reading social context and managing my curiosity in socially acceptable ways. I stood and began pointing and loudly asking my parents to tell me about these people with skin almost as dark as black coffee.

I can still feel the mix of embarrassment and fear that radiated from the whispered "hush" of my father and mother. Powerful social boundaries were communicated by their body language and vocal tone and deposited into my solar plexus, along with "don't play with matches," "don't steal jewelry from your Aunt Marion," and "don't ask where babies come from."

I was not alone in my generation of hushed-up children. But, God bless the TV that arrived in our living room, bringing the face of Martin Luther King and the troubling scenes of Negro men and women being assaulted by fire hoses and German shepherds. Bringing civil rights into the living room forced a conversation in the dining room. At too early an early age I lost respect for my father and his opinions about civil rights—a loss and a grief that colors all of my own experiences of race.

And the pattern of shushing children continues.

Dr. Birgitte Vitrupp¹ studied the responses of five- to seven-year-olds to multicultural videos and story lines. In the essay "Why White Parents Don't Talk About Race," Dr. Vitrupp was astonished to discover that many families quit the study when they were asked to have intentional conversations about race. The study also concluded that, without intentional family conversation, films and books about diversity had no effects on racial attitudes of young children.

A separate study in 2007 "found that out of 17,000 families with kindergartners, 45% said they'd never, or almost never, discussed race issues with their children." Many parents assume that raising their child in a diverse environment sends the message of equality more eloquently than a conversation about race.

¹ Po Bronson & Ashley Merryman, *Nurture Shock; New Thinking About Children*, (2009) "Why White Parents Don't Talk About Race." pp.47-69.

In truth, having observed a difference, the children are at the mercy of their age-appropriate bias to like what is most like themselves. By the time of adolescence, the more diverse their school, the more the kids will self-segregate by race and ethnicity. “Increased opportunities to interact increase opportunities to reject each other,” according to Dr. James Moody in “Nurture Shock.” There are more adolescent, tribal taboo lines to cross in the lunchroom, on the playing field, in the social networks.

What stops us from talking about race? What makes us shush our children into silence?

I hope that the election of Barack Hussein Obama may help all of us become more explicit, if not comfortable, with conversations about race. We have evidence of that willingness to risk discomfort right here in this congregation.

Michelle David made a motion at the Annual Meeting in May. She asked that our community offer a program on racial diversity akin to the Welcoming Congregation curriculum. The motion was approved by a unanimous vote of the congregation.

The Committee on Ministry was charged with exploring resources within our movement and beyond. The Committee on Ministry, Director of Religious Exploration, and ministers engaged in uncomfortable conversations with each other, discovering that we had little awareness of our own race, of white culture, or white privilege. We struggled with unproductive white guilt and knew we had challenging work ahead.

For me, those conversations confirmed the work of educator Dr. Peggy McIntosh and UU theologian Thandeka. These thinkers have convinced me that people of the white race are trained not to see their so-called “advantage.” Our silence keeps us all prisoners in a social construct built with fear and shame.

Let me share the work of Dr. McIntosh. In 1988, she wrote an essay, “Unpacking the Backpack of Privilege,” which included 46 conditions of white privilege not available to her Wellesley colleagues of color. Listen to a few examples:

- When I am told about our national heritage or about “civilization,” I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
- I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race in all classes, in all subjects, at all grade levels.
- I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
- I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world’s majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.
- I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
- I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of race.
- I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.

This article is required reading for most diversity trainings.

Over the years, Dr. McIntosh has noted two misreadings of her work. First, a guilty but well-meaning response by white readers who “have felt that they will now just divest themselves of unearned advantage.”

“It’s just not that simple,” she writes. “Doors will continue to open for us (no matter what we do).” But we can “collaborate, work as allies, and create change in the culture” -- much in the same way of feminist consciousness-raising, and addressing homophobia in the Welcoming Congregation curriculum.

The second misreading, according to Dr. McIntosh, comes from some people of color who interpret the paper in a way that “deepens a sense of white conspiracy -- that is, that white people know all about (their) racial status and behavior as whites,” and conclude that white people already know the details of white advantage.

“On the contrary,” she writes, “I was carefully taught in hundreds of ways not to know, not to see, what I wrote in that paper. I was taught that I didn’t have a race. The word ‘race’ referred to other people. I was just *normal*.”

She concludes, “People who benefit most, in the short term, from privilege systems are kept most blinded to them -- because awareness would challenge the ideology that democracy is working well.”²

Unitarian Universalist theologian Thandeka is well aware of the economic and political consequences of white advantage. She challenged the UUA’s diversity curriculum about white privilege. She questioned the theology of motivating via guilt, asserted that most white folks are not racist, and that we waste our time when we sit in circles confessing our racism. It was difficult for me to hear her say, “it is not our power that needs rehabilitation, but our weakness, our lack of courage.”

If Thandeka were here today leading a workshop, she would begin by asking us to reflect for a moment on this question: “When did you first learn that you were white?” How were you taught? Who did the teaching? What were the consequences of forgetting your color assignment?

Thandeka has listened to several hundred answers to these questions and concluded that one *learns* to be white, learns to make racial distinctions that shape attention, posture, behavior, and so forth. She believes that learning and behaving “white” is “not a matter of racist conviction but a matter of survival. Being white is not a privilege but a penalty.

“Whiteness is a behavioral jail in which we trade our freedom for a sense of belonging. The impulses to moral action are slain on behalf of retaining membership in the white community.”³

² Chapter 18: “White Privilege, Color and Crime: A Personal Account,” from “Images of Color, Images of Crime: Readings” by Coramae Richey Mann and Marjorie S. Zatz; 1998; Roxbury Publishing Company, Los Angeles, CA

³ Thandeka, “Learning to Be White.”

This process of learning to be white is largely invisible. Thandeka might ask us to play the “Race Game.” Try it, if you are of a mind. The game is simple. Every time you mention the name of a person in conversation, it must be prefaced with a racial designation. So if I were to tell you about my weekend, I would tell you about my white friend whose brother was recently killed in a motorcycle accident in Baltimore; and how I shopped at the Thrift Shop of Boston, and had a good conversation with a white woman about how I’d found six journals, Gypsy Lore, collections of folktales and music gathered by well-educated white men at the turn of the last century. I’d tell you about the white farmer who sold me tomatoes and squash at the farmer’s market.

Thandeka’s analysis suggests that American culture, via our parents and teachers, shapes race consciousness for economic reasons. She teaches that from the beginning of this country, racism was a strategy devised to protect economic class interests. Racial contempt functioned as a wall between poor whites and blacks, protecting the ruling elite in a colonial empire.

Thandeka believes that imitating mannerisms and styles of “high culture” is the way the racial and class barrier is reinforced—hear a description from Donald Nathanson, an ethnic person who consciously emulates the WASP ideal:

“Look what happens if I take on the role of a sophisticated, urbane, upper-class WASP gentleman. Shelved, for the moment, will be my own more characteristic ebullience and the tendency to wave my arms. ... Everything about me will suggest that I am in command. Brought to the fore will be such mannerisms as an air of utter restraint, a debonair and condescending attitude of uninvolvement ... in the antics of what are defined as ‘lesser folk,’ and a certain highly stylized set of attitudes toward nearly everything, all expressed with considerable economy of gesture.”

Thandeka concludes that “such behavior is trained into us during childhood by a culture or subculture with highly specific rules for the display and control of innate affect.”

Thandeka asserts that whites’ parents raise their children to be white children rather than raising them to be *human*—that white parenting means shaming children when their affects are expressed in non-white ways. Not all of us will agree with her conclusion -- but it invites a question that will make all parents uncomfortable.

Thandeka and Peggy McIntosh encourage us to become conscious of the cultural prison that divides poor from poor—that offers a false sense of privilege in exchange for the liveliness of our authentic, affective core selves. She does not counsel us to confess the abuse of our power, but instead invites us to see the fear that holds us hostage to a cultural ideal.

I look forward to the challenging work of becoming real with each other. I am grateful for the courage our Unitarian Universalist sisters and brothers who struggle to find a home in our movement. I am sustained by their commitment to stay in this community because they are willing to be part of making the dream of beloved community real—even though they may, at times, feel like “a fish out of water.”

This work will not be completed in our lifetime and so demands love, faith, and forgiveness.
Would you join with me in a prayer for this work for generations to come:

Spirit of life, mother-father God, we welcome this chance -- once again -- to live as we wish the world would live. May we find within ourselves the courage to be who we are.

May we know when it is time to listen and when it is time to speak.

May we trust ourselves to be the ones to find the words that need to be said or to do what needs to be done.

May we trust one another's experience and know there are many ways to go through life.

May we know that though we cannot change some of what life gives to us, we can choose how we deal with what we are given.

May we discover the power in our vulnerability. May we know that a community of compassion and justice is possible.

Help us to see that we are all connected; that we depend upon one another in all that we do. We are one body.⁴

⁴ Barbara Hamilton-Holway, adapted, from Association Sunday 2009 Worship Resources.

Benediction:

from Lake Geneva Summer Assembly, July 5, 2001

Become aware of the hands that you are holding—
Their warmth, texture, and weight.
As an infant these same hands reached out for the nourishment of milk
As a child these hands shakily wrote a name
on paper for the first time
These hands have wiped away tears, clenched in anger,
waved hello and goodbye countless times
and embraced loved ones
And now these hands are the tangible link
that connect us to one another
These are hands that have worked, are working,
and will work to make the world a better place
I invite you to look around and see those around
you who have experienced so much that is life
May the circle be open but never broken.
Go in peace. Go in love.

Work for justice.

Go forth and bless the world.
Amen and blessed be!